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SUBJECT: SOMALI PRESIDENT YUSUF: LOST IN TRANSLATION

Classified By: Political Counselor Michael J. Fitzpatrick, Reasons 1.4
(B) and (D).

11. (S) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met May 15 with Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf, who was transiting through Nairobi en route to Somalia. Yusuf vacillated between professions of wanting the Mogadishu ministers back in government and threats of action against them if they did not come on board. He reiterated his desire that we support the TFG, specifically by working through it to advance our CT objectives, a refrain that derives from Yusuf's desire to centralize as much power as possible in his office. As we explore with the different branches of government a way to support reconciliation within the TFG and between factions in Mogadishu, our contacts with Yusuf will remain key, but they will likely be more damage control than constructive engagement. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) After nearly a month away in various European and African capitals, Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf passed through Nairobi on his way back to Baidoa. In a May 15 meeting at the Ambassador's residence, Yusuf said he believed circumstances were improving throughout Somalia, with the exception of Mogadishu. He expressed concerns that what is now happening in Mogadishu could easily happen in Merca and Kismayo as well. It appears that the Islamic courts are gaining ground, particularly in terms of support from the general populace.

13. (C) Yusuf remained put out by the warlords who had been made MPs and cabinet members, but still refused to come on board with the government. He declared that he was for neither side in the conflict in Mogadishu, but then proceeded to describe the warlords as enemies of the people. The people, he said, have drawn the conclusion that because those killing them are ministers, the government must be behind the fighting. Nevertheless, Yusuf said, "I still believe we need to bring the warlords on board." The Ambassador agreed it was important for the warlords to be brought back into government and asked for Yusuf's thoughts on how to overcome the current divisions. (Yusuf changed the subject.)

14. (S) The Ambassador referred to Yusuf's recent remarks in Sweden, saying that his assertion that the U.S. was funding the warlords had hurt our relationship and inadvertently helped Hassan Dahir Aweys and his allies. Yusuf responded that he had been asked who was behind the fighting, to which he had responded that a foreign power was working with the warlords instead of the government. He recalled previous conversations with USG representatives in which he had emphasized the need to work through, and thereby support, the government. The Ambassador countered that we do support the government, citing in particular his recent conversations with the Prime Minister and the Speaker. He pointed out that he did not see a contradiction between working with a few

individuals in Mogadishu on a specific activity and offering our moral support to the government as a whole.

¶5. (C) Yusuf criticized PM Gedi's inability to have any effect on the situation in Mogadishu. If a person can't do anything in his own area, Yusuf asked, how can he rule other Somalis? "Gedi needs to get his area under control." The Ambassador agreed that this would be good, but noted that Mogadishu involves particularly difficult circumstances. The only way to get control of Mogadishu, he said, is to bring the government and warlords together. The Ambassador suggested that Yusuf make a public statement calling for a cease-fire, asking the renegade ministers to come to Baidoa and participate in the government, and warning the Somalis of the dangers of extremist elements being sheltered in their midst. Yusuf responded that he had already called for an end to the fighting and asked the ministers to re-join the government. If they failed to come back to the fold, he would take action against them. The Ambassador counseled that threats to the ministers would likely keep them away from Baidoa and urged Yusuf to use less hostile approaches to the warlords.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Of the three pillars of our top level engagement with the Somalis - President, Prime Minister, and Speaker - Yusuf is the most difficult and least predictable. He remains a warlord and old-style politician who, ultimately, would like all power in Somalia to reside in his office. His take-it-or-leave-it approach to the Mogadishu ministers would not advance either the prospects of the TFG or peace in Mogadishu, but neither of these points seem to really matter to Yusuf. So firm is his belief in his own authority that Yusuf at times interpreted our statements as supporting his very hard line, meaning that points had to be

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repeated several times to emphasize our belief in a need for outreach to the warlords, not threats. Yusuf will be critical to the success of any effort to draw the Mogadishu ministers back to the government, but the nature of our engagement with him will likely be more damage control than constructive engagement. END COMMENT.

¶7. (C) BIO NOTE: Yusuf appeared in good health, although he advised that he had undertaken medical consultations in Germany in addition to his usual check-up in England. He was surprisingly energetic and verbose, a departure from his usual reserve when speaking English. Unfortunately, his greater ease with either the language or the Ambassador does not seem to have improved his understanding of our basic points. END NOTE.
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